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ABSTRACT

Questions of censorship in education have been debated at length for decades, but it is only in recent years that the dialectic called public opinion has refined the issue in terms of the distinctions between guidelines and censorship. Despite the many differences with regard to inclusion and exclusion (including perspective, techniques, and motivation), guidelines and censorship both seem to have certain qualities in common. Both involve a desire to limit people's access to particular materials and/or viewpoints. Both are acts of presumption--they "draw the line" at some point in determining whether materials should be included or excluded. Finally, people who act as individuals or within groups to develop guidelines or to further censorship are engaged in legitimate activities in a democratic society. In this sense, intellectual freedom, academic excellence, the enunciation of rights and the promulgation of guidelines are not the property of professional organizations. They are public issues, and, as such, parents and other conservative groups have every right to question and offer answers. (HOD)

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GUIDELINES AND CENSORSHIP--SORTING IT OUT

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
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A commercial publisher requires the firm's editors to weed out controversial materials from literary anthologies, excluding materials offensive either to religious fundamentalists or to advocates of ethnic and sexual equality.

The Intellectual Freedom Foundation produces a film intended to promote freedom of speech, but critics say it depicts minorities unfairly and demand its withdrawal.

A high school principal in Maryland orders an English teacher to remove certain works by Aristotle and Machiavelli from his tenth-grade course because the works aren't within the district's curriculum guidelines.

The Council on Interracial Books for Children urges librarians not to purchase books which stereotype and otherwise present distorted views of minorities.

Norma and Mel Gabler speak against adoption of a textbook series in Texas, claiming the books are disrespectful to Americanism and fundamental morality. On 60 Minutes, Norma explains, "When we do it, it's called censorship. When they do it, it's called guidelines."

The Gablers have posed the problem as forthrightly as anyone in academe has. Intellectual freedom, academic excellence, the enunciation of rights and promulgation of guidelines--these issues aren't the property of professional organizations like AAUP, ALA, CIBC, and NCTE. They are public issues, and the Gablers and the Moral Majority have every right to ask embarrassing questions and offer wrongheaded answers: What kinds of actions in fact constitute "censorship," and what kinds constitute legitimate applications of guidelines? Are some guidelines censorial, while others are not? Is the reason for removing an offensive book or film crucial to identifying a censorial act? If so, which reasons? Whose reasons?

I have been fretting for some time over questions of guidelines and censorship, making notes and talking to teachers and administrators at all levels. My present, near-desperate feeling is that it is not possible to come with one fifty-words-or-less statement beginning "Censorship is..." and another beginning "Guidelines are...."

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The very process of defining confounds us. As the semanticists have noted, the structure of predication falsely suggests that static, invariant, and taxonomically adequate attributes can be predicated of a subject. Predication is a risky business when applied to a word like "chair"; what a monstrous problem when we are asked to apply it to abstractions like "censorship" and "guidelines."

Although I was brought up as a fervent Aristotelian, I dimly recognized the predication bear-trap as a teenager when I went through innumerable all-night arguments on the definition of jazz. The purists said that jazz is improvised music, which didn't work because keyboard players were improvising all over the place in the eighteenth century. Besides that, Count Basie's band reading an arrangement is clearly jazzier than a couple of symphony musicians noodling ineptly with "Jada." Almost nobody involved in these arguments was pleased when I said that you can't come up with a definition of jazz that applies in a dependable way to the real world. You've got to list numerous jazz-like qualities, hierarchically if you like, then look at each performance and see if it partakes of some or all of those qualities, and to what degree, and with what amount of skill. Thus, the symphony players doing a bad job on "Jada" were jazzy to the extent that they were improvising, but their articulation lacked the elasticity of jazz phrasing, their melodies ignored devices like blue notes and certain grace notes and slurs and growls, and they lacked just about everything else on my list, or on anyone's list, of jazzlike qualities. And of course, Basie's sax section might exemplify virtually every jazzlike quality except improvisation when they read an arrangement.

To draw the obvious parallel: I think that the sanest way of contrasting censorship and guidelines is by listing a series of qualities that guidelines can be said to embody, and by listing another list of qualities for censorship. There should

probably also be a list of qualities held in common, because guidelines and censorship do resemble each other in important ways. Granted, anyone who prepares such a list will be juggling deduction and induction in very chancy ways, and playing God just as those who make definitions do. But it seems to me that lists of qualities acknowledge the squiggliness of real world events much better than definitions do.

The application of a list of guideline/censorship qualities to particular documents could prove interesting, and disturbing. It might be that a position statement, brochure, or booklist from the Gablers or CIBC or NCTE shows certain qualities of guidelines and certain qualities of censorship. If so, that's a good starting point for discussion and action. Most documents from groups inclined to be "censorial" would, I suspect, show at least some qualities of guidelines, and libertarians would have to acknowledge that. A list of qualities would make chronic labelers unhappy, because they like to stick with oversized predications, summary judgments like "Jones is a censor" or "We are an advisory group." But I can't think of a fairer way of stating the problem of guidelines and censorship or applying the terms to statements or documents.

I've attempted a list of qualities of guidelines and censorship, followed by some qualities they appear to have in common. The list is highly tentative and is probably most useful as a vulnerable first draft. But it strikes me as an interesting way of initially attacking the problem. The list includes a point-by-point correspondence of items in each column.

Guidelines	Censorship
-stresses selection and inclusion of materials	-stresses exclusion and removal of materials
-states underlying principles	-offers <u>ad hoc</u> criticism, omitting or disguising underlying principles
-states positive criteria for inclusion	-states objections, "thou shalt nots"

-elaborates on statements via rational argumentation
-avoids logical fallacies & propaganda techniques
-is pluralistic with regard to
  .religious and philosophical beliefs
  .political beliefs
  .personal morality and life styles
-invites broad participation, especially on controversial points
-acknowledges that points are arguable

-includes some (but not all) individuals with special training and/or certification
-recognizes rights of individuals to dissent from the favored view

-states arguments bluntly, without development
-is illogical; uses propaganda techniques
-is ideological with regard to
  .religious and philosophical beliefs
  .political beliefs
  .personal morality and life styles
-seeks to limit input, inviting only others of same persuasion
-takes an absolute stand on points advanced
-fails to make use of individuals with special training and/or certification
-seeks to impose the favored view on all others

Despite many differences with regard to inclusion and exclusion, guidelines and censorship both seem to have certain qualities in common. Both involve a desire to limit people's access to particular materials and/or viewpoints. This is a hard statement, but I cannot dodge it no matter how hard I try. A committee preparing a guidelines list might omit Little Black Sambo because the book stereotypes the Black child and fails to meet the positive criteria of fair and dignified treatment of various ethnic groups. A negative, censorial list might differ only in that it includes Little Black Sambo on a list of books which should not be included in libraries. The explicit censorial element might have the very same motivation that prompted the guidelines committee to avoid mention of the book on its list. In both cases the clear intention is to downplay the book, and the hope is that there will be limited access to it because of the dissemination of the guidelines (which omit it) or the censorial list (which includes it).

Both guidelines and censorship are acts of presumption; both "draw the line" at some point in determining whether materials should be included or excluded. As noted in the lists above, the tone and content of criteria will tend to be different in guidelines. But both, self-evidently, have some sort of task to perform, whether it is furthering of a particular social or religious doctrine or judging whether

seventh graders are smart enough or mature enough to read Of Mice and Men. Given the limited data base that we have for making all sorts of subjective judgments--about moral values, intelligence, maturity, or whatever--I think it is wise to acknowledge that the most enlightened sets of guidelines, like the most outrageous censorial documents, are created to some extent by dint of presumption.

Finally, people who act as individuals or within groups to develop guidelines or to further censorship are engaged in legitimate activities in a democratic society. I see an important distinction, both ethically and legally, between advocating censorship and direct censorial action. An individual or pressure group that urges a school board to, say, exclude textbooks that teach evolution and include only those that teach a creationist theory is exercising legitimate Constitutional rights. Only the fact of removing evolution and requiring Biblical creationism would be subject to litigation, possibly on the grounds of separation of church and state. Hence, the Gablers are as much within their rights as an NCTE Committee to Revise Books for You.

Of course, questions of censorship in education have been debated at length for decades, even centuries--or else Aristotle, that ancient corrupter of youth, would not have been required to drink hemlock. But it is only in recent years that the hulking dialectic we call public opinion has refined the issue in terms of the distinctions between guidelines and censorship. Among the more consistent voices on this question in recent years has been Edward Jenkinson, former chair of the NCTE Committee Against Censorship. At a Cincinnati convention session last year Jenkinson said, "I do not object to guidelines . . . so long as they are voluntary, not mandatory. . . . So long as they allow freedom of choice, not mandated selection. . . . I do not fear guidelines that are sound attempts at consciousness-raising, so long as they remain just that. . . . But I do fear those guidelines that give the protectors of the young

license to go hunting through libraries and classrooms looking for the targets they can shoot down."

These are hard words. An even-handed application of Jenkinson's ideas, like the ones proposed in my lists, might prove embarrassing to certain anti-censorship groups as well as the censors who are the objects of their attacks. As St. Paul says, in some ways we all sin.